

**Interview with Vivian Morgan-Mendez
Conducted by Linda Byrne
for the Providence District History Project
Providence Perspective**

May 23, 2008

Linda: Today is May 23rd 2008 and I am Linda Byrne and I am sitting at the home of Vivian Morgan Mendez in Vienna for the purposes of an interview for the Providence Perspective History Project. Good Morning Vivian.

Vivian: Good morning.

Linda: Thank you for having me in your home. It's um lovely here. We are in a townhouse subdivision ah what do you call this area?

Vivian: This is Country Creek Homeowners Association.

Linda: Um hum, okay would you start and tell me about yourself and growing up and how you ended up in Fairfax County.

Vivian: Okay! I ah was born in Pennsylvania lived most of my, well through high school in Kentucky in Appalachia, I grew up in a very poor area. I went to college in Ohio and after college I joined the Peace Corps. I went to Brazil; I worked for three years there with the Peace Corps and wound up living 24 years in Brazil and then came to Fairfax County in 1991.

Linda: So what languages do you speak?

Vivian: Portuguese, Spanish

Linda: And obviously

Vivian: And obviously English.

Linda: Laughing, that's great. Um and ah you are married?

Vivian: Yes.

Linda: How did you meet your husband?

Vivian: I met my husband in Brazil, he's from Chile.

Linda: And um is he working here?

Vivian: Yes, he works in Loudon County.

Linda: Okay. Ah one of the things I noticed - your name comes up a lot in connection with a park we have in the area called Nottoway Park.

Vivian: I am not surprised.

Linda: Could you talk about that?

Vivian: Yes, actually you're looking out on Nottoway Park, this is one of the new additions to the park, one of the few since it was built or since it was established.

Linda: I am looking out of your dining room window – it's absolutely gorgeous, your yard and um on into the wooded area.

Vivian: Yeah, the wooded area is ah how I got involved in the park.

Linda: Now the park has been around since the 1970's?

Vivian: I think early 1970's and we moved here in 1991 and the thing that surprised me most in Fairfax County is more people were moving into this area but the green space was not increasing and particularly not the public green space.

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: And I think it was the second time that then Supervisor Connolly ran for ran for election, yeah it was his re-election. He came to my door on a Sunday afternoon; knocked on the door and said do you have any concerns? And I said well actually I have two concerns and one of them was that the green space was not increasing - again, in particular in public areas. And he said, well do you have a proposal? I said yes and I explained to him the situation of this land, which is land locked the owner was unable to sell it and it was right next to the park it

would make a wonderful addition to green space. And he said write this up and send it to me. So I got some professional help to evaluate the cost of the land and I sent it to him. And sometime later I got a copy of the letter that he sent to Joanne Malone and he said have you ever thought about buying this land one of your constituents is asking.

Linda: And Joanne Malone was the Park Authority.

Vivian: She was the Park Authority Board Representative from Providence District.

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: And years passed and I never heard anything. Um several years later my neighbor was trying to sell her townhouse and the gentlemen the prospective buyer wanted her to affirm that these trees would always be here before he would sign a contract. And she said I don't know how to do that, but let's call the county. And that's when we found out that the Park Authority had purchased the land and that they had other plans for it, not being keeping it as green space. Uh they told my neighbor that they could not guaranteed that something wouldn't be built there. So, that's how I got involved with Nottoway Park.

Linda: So um continue along those lines. I know the Andreses, Bud Andres was very interested in that, another family in the area. What did the county plan to do with the land or eventually see they thought that they...

Vivian: Shortly after all the homeowners in this area received a notice that there would be a public meeting with the Park Authority to discuss what they were going to do with the 6.5 acres that had been purchased. It was actually a little more than this original plot that I had suggested then to Supervisor Connolly because there was another opportunity to add on another little piece which the Park Authority did. Um and the notice made mention of - building on the land. So, we tried to get neighbors to go; we actually got quite a few neighbors to go to the meeting and we were shocked when we got there because there were Plans on the boards around the wall showing all these townhouses on both sides of the park and a maintenance facility up here in what is now what we thought was an

area we had preserved as green space. One of my neighbors Richard Bavier looked and said hey, that's my townhouse. I said look Richard this is us this is Sharon she's just 10 feet from the park.

The Park Authority was obviously not prepared for us. They did not have enough chairs for the community, they did find some chairs at the school and we had a long give and take session the first of many of several years of the Nottoway saga. That's when we began to realize that we had to change we had to present an alternative to the Park Authority that was better than taking out trees and putting in a maintenance facility here.

Linda: So they were going to take the 6.5 acres and use that for maintenance facility. Where was there - were they going to move one, or add a new maintenance facility?

Vivian: There was a small maintenance facility here at Nottoway. Nottoway is an Area 7 Regional Maintenance Management Operation

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: and it was inadequate for the employees, it was inadequate for storage. Um the same time I was still going to the Oak Marr Rec Center and everyday I went by where I could look out and see the new maintenance facility there. So we knew that a mile and half down the road there was another alternative.

Linda: The Maintenance Facility that existed at

Vivian: Oak Marr

Linda: at Oak Marr.

Vivian: At Oak Marr yes, and as we you know got further into the process we found out that part of the maintenance of Oak Marr is done by the same people who were here in Nottoway.

Linda: So

Vivian: This was election time I believe it was 2003. Bud and Peg Andress were petitioning for a candidate or working for a candidate in Nottoway Park and Steve Shannon came by and he said this is the park that I always walked in. My wife and I walked in.

Linda: Steve Shannon is our Delegate.

Vivian: Steve Shannon is our Delegate yes and he said I can't believe the Park Authority is thinking about taking out all those trees and putting in a maintenance facility. And he said I would be willing to send out a letter in support of not doing this. And that gave real impetus ah to what we were doing because before we were petitioning in the park, we were petitioning at every entrance to the park. We were petitioning at Nottoway Nights and we finally collected over 3,500 signatures asking the Park Authority to protect the trees in the park. So, that's how a lot of us got involved with Nottoway Park.

During this process I became good friends with Joanne Malone um and I told her if we could find another way to do that we were good people this was not because the trees were behind our house but it was because it was the right thing to do; and that if we could find another way to do this then we would support the park and we found another way. Ah this went on for a couple of years; you can ask the Park Authority, its public record. Um at the final hearing for Nottoway we had already given a written proposal to the Park Authority to consolidate the maintenance facilities at Oak Marr and that was probably in 2005, I am thinking. We never got a response from the Park Authority. We gave a copy to Mr. Connolly we gave a copy to actually I delivered a copy to Supervisor Smyth at the Community Meeting that Joanne Malone set up at Oakton High School. And I delivered a copy to the Park Authority to the representatives who were there, to Joanne Malone. I sent it by email and we never heard a single thing.

Much to my surprise three or four years later John Hopkins from the Park Authority says told me, oh I'm moving to Oak Marr, my staff is moving to Oak Marr. He's the Area 7 Operations Chief and I said really. And he repeated to me the same reasons that we had put in the Business Proposal from moving the facility to Oak Marr.

Linda: So you had had a major effect but didn't know it.

Vivian: Not acknowledged by the Park Authority.

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: And today his staff is well equipped, better equipped, has good conditions to work in the winter and is just simply a consolidation a mile and half down the road.

Linda: What kind of things do they have to take from that mile and half down the road facility to bring here to work is it um what kinds of things do they need?

Vivian: People.

Linda: Ah so it's not equipment basically it's um.

Vivian: As I understand it ball field maintenance is contracted out.

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: The mowing in the park is contracted out. So it's basically John and whatever staff he has, I mean they may have to move something; but if they are bringing in gravel, or they are bringing in mulch or woodchips the Forest Division dumps it where they are suppose to dump it in Nottoway and it gets used. It was such a simple thing but we were told when we first brought up this idea that it was impossible ah and the reasons given in a meeting in almost then Supervisor Smyth cause she was just about to to ah become Supervisor. We were told that the Oak Marr facility stores chemicals for the golf course that are not permitted in parks. Of course Oak Marr is part of a public park. And I finally said to the person from the Park Authority, you know I cook a lot at home I don't mix sugar and salt, they are in separate containers. You have more than enough room more than enough room to build some more bins up there if you need to store materials. And you've got ample office room.

Linda: So how do you feel about all of this now?

Vivian: Um I guess I feel like I dedicated a couple of years to saving 6.5 acres of trees and I am not still I'm not sure that that has ended. Because after the public hearing the Park Authority Board met and decided that in the other forest in the park they would put a full size soccer field which would probably take out 4.5 acres of trees in the heart of the trail where Bud Andress walks with his dog every morning.

Linda: Do you know how many acres Nottoway Park is total.

Vivian: It's about 90 acres.

Linda: 90 acres.

Vivian: It started out as, actually it might be a little over that as you mentioned earlier, before we were taping it was established in the early 1970's and there was no addition to this park until, um and I don't have the right date when I am thinking maybe 1998 or the year 2000

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: when these new parcels were added. So as the community grew and became more urban there was no more green space and that was my whole point with then Supervisor Connolly. You've got to add the green space if you're adding the people. Um as a result of that we volunteer at the park. Um this year we ran the Easter Egg Hunt, we relandscaped around Hunter House which is the house you have on your Providence Perspective. (Used picture of the Hunter House on flyer telling about this oral history project.) Um we staff Nottoway Nights, the concert series in the summer and last year we started a new project, which is actually my husband is the project leader. We're working in the heart of the forest on the other side of the park I believe it's the Northwest side and we started with originally with an acre to remove invasive shrubs, vines, plants and then plant trees. He's in the second year of that project and I think you and I have actually talked about this on another occasion.

Linda: We have.

Vivian: How do we recruit volunteers to go out and do hard work in the forest.

Linda: Yes.

Vivian: And that area is directly across from where the new soccer field would be built. So on one side we are trying to conserve the trees and um I believe the recommendation of the Task Force that was set up after um the 2232 hearing after the County said yes the Park Authority can build a new soccer field in the woods. I believe um – hey I lost my train of thought.

Linda: You were talking about the soccer field and the County and um taking out an additional four acres of trees. I had a quick question. How many soccer fields are in Nottoway right now?

Vivian: there is one rectangular field, it is not a full size, there are two open play areas all of those get actively used for soccer. One of the Proposals that we made to the Park Authority was artificial turf and actually the studies that we did showed much more playing time than the Park Authority studies. Because we happen to have community garden right by the basketball field so we know how long the basketball courts are used and with soccer and lights and turf you can really increase the usage.

Linda: Are there lights there now?

Vivian: Yes, all of the basketball, tennis, everything in Nottoway Park is lit and the park stays open until 11:00 o'clock sometimes people stay longer and we have to turn out the lights.

Linda: So the new soccer field is proposed to be a large one.

Vivian: Proposed to be a large one.

Linda: Is the one that is there now that is not a large one - is it possible to enlarge it?

Vivian: Not to make it regulation size

Linda: Um hum.

Vivian: and therefore it was not eligible for funding from the 2000 I think it's the 2006 Park Bond. What is now going to be done is one of the things we have proposed. Take one of the diamond fields, turf it and make it a multi use field and that's what is going to be done. There is going to be a portable mound at the back field that can be moved out so if you have four groups of young, very young soccer players you can probably have four training sessions going on in the field or even more. Because there are already four going on in the rectangular field. Because we are not getting more space and it makes no sense to keep taking out trees if technology, lighting and turf let you use the facility better. Because many of the diamond fields are used once a day during the short season or maybe not at all.

Linda: Do you find um opposition from the soccer community to your trying to save this um additional four acres of trees?

Vivian: We tried to work with them during this process and they would always agree to meet, but never show up; and we finally ah you know continue to make our proposals and to make legitimate business proposals - better ways to do things. Fortunately I think they have come to the same conclusion that we have it does not make sense to take out an area that's used by all kinds of people from very elderly people to little kids because there's a trail there, a picnic area, and there are woods. And I think what I learned from all of this is that if you are ever going to fight a Park Authority or a County Government you have to make it very clear that it is unfair to take things from one group of users and give them to another. You've got to find better ways of doing things. It's also very unfair to pit user groups against each other and that's what the Park Authority did with us. Because they managed, and the sports groups have obviously had some participation in this, but Vienna Little League and Vienna Youth Soccer teamed up against us during the whole process and Vienna Little League said absolutely not, you cannot convert one of our fields to a soccer field because we need that field. Again, we live right across from that field we know how often that field is used.

Linda: Very interesting. Um if someone is moving into Fairfax County in the future what kind of advice do you have for them? As far as – well let me go back

and let's do another question before we do that. As you have lived here since ah for quite a while tell me about the traffic and changes in congestion um this beautiful Park that's here in the middle keeps people from having to travel to other areas to walk or exercise or Nottoway Nights the wonderful concert series. What changes have you see in transportation and availability of public transportation as well?

Vivian: I don't drive and it's a choice; that is one of my ways of helping the environment. My husband says I am just lazy; but I never learned and I don't drive so I take public transportation um it's a hassle. The few times I take Metro to go downtown, either the cars are sharing tracks or the cars keep stopping, the train keeps stopping. The bus service is abominable in this part of Fairfax County. I quit going to Oak Marr because the bus only runs once every hour. Um if you want to go to the Government Center on the Fairfax Connector you can go all the time, but if you want to go to places that normal people go – if you want to go to the town of Vienna you have two choices taxi or walking. There is no bus service to the town of Vienna. To go to Tyson's Corner you have to go to Dunn Loring and get the Metro or you have to walk to Vienna and catch the bus, the same bus that goes to Tyson's corner.

We moved here in 91. I can tell you that just by concert attendance at the park and what I see there has been a huge increase in population - the bus service is the same as it was. It's actually worse because of the congestion because the buses run late. Ah my husband works in Loudon County, he does have to be there at 7:30 in the morning. He now leaves at 6:15 in the morning and takes his breakfast and has breakfast before he starts work because any later than that, the 29 miles are going to become an hour an hour and ten an hour fifteen minutes.

Linda: This is by car?

Vivian: This is by car. Yea he is the Court Engineer in Loudon and fortunately he has to be there early because he has to be there before the courts open.

Linda: So you've seen a

Vivian: A big change for the worse. We also got involved in discussions on Metro West which is a big project that is going to go in on the other side of I66 simply because the County has not put in infrastructure to keep up with changes and developers are not putting in enough infrastructure for the people that they're bringing. We often joke that you know Nottoway Park is going to be a double decker. You mentioned you know it's easy to get to Nottoway Park, but there's limited parking. If you live more than a mile away or don't jog you're probably going to drive. There are no bike racks so if you bike you literally have to stay with your bike. And yes, people walk; people walk from the other side of I66, they walk probably a mile and a half maybe to get to the park. And we're now - last year about half the people who came to the concerts walked. It's sort of like the hills of Kentucky, they come up the hills, the vales, the valleys because it is easier and that tells you also that you're getting tremendous density here around the park to have that many people walking.

Linda: There is a new park in Oakton, ten acres um it was formally the Corbalis property and they will be putting a soccer field, um I believe it is a regulation large field in there.

Vivian: I think it is a small field.

Linda: Is it a small field.

Vivian: Yeah I think.

Linda: I know the original Plans had a smaller field I think to accommodate up to 13 years of age but then I saw something possibly in the paper that it was a larger field. I don't know, I may be misspeaking here. Do you think that will help Nottoway or how do you feel about that.

Vivian: It's not a question of helping Nottoway it's a question of providing adequate facilities for everyone. And I don't think that Fairfax County can afford to build soccer fields, any kind of fields that don't have artificial turf or don't have lighting. We live right by three or four diamond fields and sure there's light coming in through the trees but it's not a problem. Sure you hear the baseball bats that's fine. And I actually went to the Oakton Park hearing and I testified as

some of us did against having a park where you are putting in a new ball field of any kind where you are specifically telling the community you are not going to light and you're not going to put in artificial turf. Fairfax County is only growing in construction and people; it's not growing in green space.

There are other alternatives, for example up at Oak Marr there are two huge rectangle fields which are currently used by Lacrosse players. It could be soccer, it could be Lacrosse, it could be kickball. Those fields are not lit, they are not turfed but they are there. Someone promised the community that they would never light those fields well guess what; they are right by a golf course and a driving range where you have a huge amount of light which apparently does not bother the community. And you've got a huge tree buffer compared to what you have with the houses around Nottoway Park so there are lots of ways to do the same thing.

Linda: With technology changing so rapidly um I can appreciate what you are saying that we have to be open minded about what we are going to do to try and solve these green space problems here in Fairfax County. How have you found we have a little inclination about this but tell us how you found working with the County Government and how you have been able to be successful?

Vivian: Actually I have found it easy to work with some people at Fairfax County Government. Ah very qualified, dedicated professionals; others it was literally impossible because they had a preset idea of what they wanted to do.

They told us we did not know how to run parks that we did not really know how to do anything and we should stay out of it. I personally ran into the two the two kinds of employees. At the public hearing level I was appalled at what I saw and what I heard and the way people were treated because they didn't agree with whatever the County wanted to do.

And one of the things that we decided here at home after participating in many hearings is that it's a waste of time; and we're not going to go testify again at public hearings. Because we do understand the issues, we're intelligent my husband's an Engineer, I'm an Economist. Other people that do this are qualified

government employees, journalists and we do the research and we know when there are two sides to an issue. But to go be ridiculed, ignored, questions not answered no, not going to do that again. I'd rather spend the time helping Nottoway.

So I found it a very disturbing situation. I mean we came from living many years living in a military dictatorship in Brazil with a different political system where it was very difficult to go find someone to talk to. That's not hard in Fairfax County because local government is organized, you can find the people um and get their attention. But what you get in return is very different.

Now I don't want to generalize because we have met and worked with some wonderful, wonderful County employees. But in general at the public hearing level it's a very disappointing experience; it's something I never expected. I might have expected it in Brazil but not in Fairfax County.

Linda: Let's go back to your Peace Corp work, what exactly did you do down there?

Vivian: I was ah Think Group number 26 sent to Brazil. So I left right after college in 1967. I had been through advanced training the summer before in California. Our group was chosen because of our urban experience, I guess, although I didn't come from an urban area but mostly city kids. And we were chosen to go work in the slums of the favelas in Brazil. And we continued to learn Portuguese during our senior year, got on a Pan Am plane and went to Brazil. When we got to Rio, which is one of the cities where we were suppose to work the U.S. Ambassador had a meeting with us and said you know things have changed; the Brazilian Government does not want you working in slums. So we are going to send a half of you or a third of you off to rural Guayas State of Guayas, another third to another state and another third to another state and you're going to work in rural areas. I came from Appalachia that was fine. It was not fine for a lot of our group and we had a large number of people who just who dropped out.

We were sent to work with a um National School Lunch program which I actually tried to do in my first town. Um there was a problem, there was a lot of

corruption and this was 1967 going into 1968. The school supervisor that I had to work with was the brother of the Mayor and at that time he was involved in drug traffic; and I of course uncovered this. The Peace Corps after a year moved me to another town and let me do something else.

I moved to another town in the south and managed to find some people who were already very interested in doing community development. I worked with a Franciscan Father and a community lady. she was probably wealthy by those standards at that time and we set up a knit clothing factory to employ poor women. I also worked with the school lunch program; I did nutritional surveys - things that I knew absolutely nothing about but I learned on the job. But I guess what I am proudest of is that the little factory thrived after I left.

Linda: Wonderful.

Vivian: And the only financing we got and I remember this clearly was the \$10,000 loan from AID which at that time was USE AID. The rest was community money. Ah we became rather infamous for this. This was a time again military dictatorship in Brazil. Um and actually both the Franciscan Father and I almost were put in jail. This is not something the military wanted people to be involved in and they were, they had imprisoned other people other town leaders and we were told later that we were on the list but they decided not to put us in jail. Um and the Embassy said they would have done nothing if we had been put in jail. So it was, it was a different time.

Linda: Yes.

Vivian: It was an interesting way to end my Peace Corps experience.

Linda: The other thing I wanted to ask you about is George Mason University. Tell me about your involvement there.

Vivian: Um after we came to moved back to the States I worked in New York for a couple of years and my dream had always been to get my Master's Degree, which I never did in Brazil because I was working all the time and there was really there was no way to take the courses that I wanted. So, I started my Master's Degree in

94 in International Transactions which is really international business; finished in 95 and thought that was so great that I did a couple of certificate programs after that and that was my involvement with George Mason.

Linda: And that school has grown.

Vivian: Yes, very definitely.

Linda: Is there anything else that you would like to share on this interview for people that will be listening in the future?

Vivian: Never give up. If you've have a cause and you think you are right don't give up. Number 2, volunteering makes you feel good it's the right thing to do and do it.

Linda: Great this has been a wonderful interview, thank you so much for having me in your home.

Vivian: You are most welcome.

[Recording paused]

Linda: This is a continuation of my interview with Vivian Morgan Mendez.

Vivian: One of the things that I forgot to bring up was that the new land that was added to Nottoway Park is now a Cultural Resource Protection Area. One of the things that we discovered as we investigated the history of the area is that right behind our houses there are the foundations of an old house. I believe the owner was a Blacksmith he had five slaves. The existing foundations are bordered by very large very old trees. Um as a result of our investigations the Park Authority went to the State of Virginia and the whole area is now a Cultural Resource Protection Area and it will be preserved as such. In the future we hope to be cleaning our invasive plants, and vines and shrubs and maybe make this into an educational area another hiking area for the park but we don't know what's going to happen. But that was a very positive outcome for um I think for Fairfax County History, for Black History and for the people who live in this area. Amazing what

you have in your own back yard. All the neighborhood kids know, but you don't know.

Linda: Thank you.